MRS. LOUISE M. TAFT

Mother of the Republican Candidate for the Presidency.

THE SECRET STAIR

By JOHN TRASK

It stands at the head of the long, gentle slope of lawns approached by the winding avenue to Haven, the larch on, climbing against the dark grove rising at its back, its square towers, tall and short, standing as though assembled together to defend its many small square windows looking down the unconventionally across the country side below its white walls still bearing in grim distinction the bullets of the Revolution—the house that once sheltered that famous refugee whose name has for certain reasons, since been kept in our family a matter of silence, the appropriate setting of an old romantic tale—one of its rooms reached by a stair known only to the inmates, but him of whom I speak so well that all King George's soldiers ramping through it could not find him. Having passed successively to many worthier members of the family down to the present from colonial times, it came to me, Richard Clifton. I found myself, at 26, its master, a bachelor living well-content in peace and plenty in its time-honored, time-toned halls, with a sufficient retinue of servants and an amiable maiden aunt in rustling irreproachable black silk for comfort, respectability, and all else that was fit.

It was not until she came to visit us—that cousin, Elizabeth, child of my Aunt Matilda Clifton's sister Elsa Vane, the girl whose beauty in the sculpted setting of my home filled me with the pleasure that I felt in all things exquisite and suitable in art, that the place became to me a different thing from that which it had been before. I do not mean, as some may think, a place transformed to me because I found myself in love. I did not know that I loved Elizabeth at first.

We were standing, one afternoon, by the newel in the lower hall. We had been speaking of the old story connected with the house, when Elizabeth looked up. Her eyes, searching the stairs, the balcony, the old white doors above us, open, shut, met, took on a sudden light. It was but rarely that one saw that illumination of her face.

"Where is the secret stair?" she asked, with a quick intaking of her breath. "Have you never looked?"

It seemed to me at that moment, as my eyes followed hers and all my boyhood's love for mystery and adventure sprang to answer, as remarkable that I had never looked, had accepted merely as a legend of the house and probed no further into a heritage so full of charm. The complications of affairs outside, since I had come to the estate, the wealth of what was visible in my new realm, had occupied my thoughts.

"We will find it," I cried, "you and I! We will look now!"

I held out my hand to her, a cousin's hand, but it was like her that she did not seem to see. Together, excited as two children, we sped us up the stairs. We whispered, tiptoed, like two who were on some clandestine, forbidden quest.

We went through every cranny of the house below, we stood afar off on the lawn outside and counted windows, calculated corners.

I saw afterward what it had meant to me, the ensuing period of close communion as we carried on our search—the light step that was kept beside me by a common quest, the eyes, so quick to look away, which met with mine at last in real companionship, held by a common interest, the glimpse of her rifle soul that Elizabeth was not aware she gave.

It was late one afternoon when, coming suddenly into the library where we were wont to sit, Aunt Matilda Elizabeth and I, at seasons when we came together, I found Elizabeth at her embroidery. She was not embroidering. I knew it in the brief impression. The embroidery frame was trembling in her hands. Was it the late sun through the leaded windows, throwing a mist behind her pale face and soft gown? Her hair against the blended tints of books that lined the walls, touched here and there with gold? Something in Elizabeth herself that I had never seen or felt before? I only knew—it comes to every man at least once in a lifetime—that I knew.

"Elizabeth," I cried, "I love you!" and I felt the earth go round beneath my feet.

She rose quickly, and slipped past me, her eyes, as she stood between me and the door, appealing, startled, wondrous, meeting mine through the veil of strangeness and shyness that had fallen again betwixt us as they had done in that brief period of comradeship, her hands clasped to her breast.

"I love you, too," she said.

I held my arms to her, but she took another swift step back and shook her head. There was a change in her expression, an almost—was it mirth ful?—lighting of her face.

"When," she said—"when you have found the secret stair!"

"Elizabeth," I cried, "Now! Now!" but she was gone. I heard, as I had expected, her laughter in the hall. Something in the sound, that ripple that I dared not follow, told me more. A light broke on me, in my joy and my dilemma, and I understood the laughter. She had found it! That evening it was only a question that I dared to ask her—she told me so, in words.

I knew Elizabeth too well not to know that I must win her in her own way or not at all. She was of those sweetest, willful dames of times gone by who demanded of their knights a proof of love, for whom men courted perils and crossed swords, who dwelt in lofty towers, none more eagerly sought after, to which men must climb. Did I eagerly desire her? her manner, dear and distant, told me. I would win her! I would seek! I would seek, had sprung into being in me silently I was seeking, all the love of her that assured her. Was it a knight's part to make complaint or question of his lady's will? Surely no knight of ancient days of chivalry sought, for his lady's sake, more fervently than I. If Elizabeth could find the secret passage, so could I. There was no mouse hole in the house, no ant-hole in the grounds outside, it seemed to me, that I allowed to escape my observation.

I stood by the newel in the hall with spirits low in me, one morning, and as I stood I felt a light touch, from the step above me, on my sleeve. It was Elizabeth, whom I had not seen, except at the table and at her window, for a week.

"Richard," she asked—she had never failed before to prefix it with the cousin—"Are we never going to have that little roast pig?"

Her voice—it seemed to me for one brief, intoxicating moment—was full of love and longing, of tenderness, an echo of the voice in my own heart! I held my hands to her, but she had flown, a vision, always, to enchant and disappear.

Aunt Chloe had long been threatening to roast us a little pig, in southern style, and I immediately sought our old black sovereign and tyrant in her domain.

"Well, Mars' Richard," she said, "I'll roas' him to-day—dat is if you'll fix my oven fo' me. De bricks dey fall in de oven las' night again. De yoe fallen twice now—an' Miss Elizabeth done fix 'em befo'."

I took the candle that she gave me and swinging back the door of the big old-fashioned stove bricked into the wall—from which exhaling heat and savory odors there were wont familiarly to issue on the flat, long-handled shovel our daily bread and biscuits, meat and poultry, cakes and pies—put in my head. It was not, in the now cool, black recesses, by a little puff of clammy air and dust. Four or five of the bricks from around its iron roof had—Elizabeth! Elizabeth!—as Aunt Chloe had told me, fallen down.

I drew back with the candle. If Aunt Chloe had not been occupied with other interests she would have seen that I was not the same man who went in.

"I think that I can fix it for you, Aunt Chloe," I told her carelessly, waiting anxiously behind me, "but I'll have to have the kitchen to myself awhile. Isn't there something you can find to do upstairs?"

"Taint ewine to hurt you any to have me 'round here, Mars'a Richard," she retorted, much offended, but I insisted that she leave me, as master of the house. As soon as I heard the last of her retreating footsteps I seized the rolling-pin that she had left lying on the table, the only hammer I could find available, and with an arm made strong by what I saw, brought down other of the bricks around the oven roof. The iron top of the oven, its grooves in the discolored brickwork, was a sliding door. It yielded to my efforts, groaning, and slid back—and the secret stairway was before me, its iron parts, leading from the oven, bedded in the solid masonry with mighty bolts. Hidden so well, I told myself in ecstasy, regarding it, that no one but the devil, that gentleman accustomed to a warm temperature, could have found it. I did not stop to follow that old master at the game of hide-and-seek in his crooked, dark and sadly cramping, if safe, passage through the walls; to discover that it was a little store-room, its partitions now thrown open and the doorway from the secret stair walled over, into which the passage led—the whole house having seemingly been planned to conceal the ingenious contrivance, defying detection to the last. All that came afterward—like Aunt Chloe's dread wrath. I took me to my love.

When Elizabeth and I had returned from our all too brief honeymoon, and Aunt Matilda had gracefully resigned her rustling, black-silken reign—we strolled hand in hand through the old colonial mansion, planning a few—a very few—more modern improvements. As we stepped together into the spacious kitchen, followed by the aged cook, I fancied I caught a sudden gleam of amused understanding pass between them. In the privacy of our apartments that evening I charged Elizabeth with having told Aunt Chloe to call me to repair the oven on a momentous occasion, but she only smiled and would not answer—then nor since.

Would Begin in Schools.

At the International Missionary conference recently one of the speakers advocated the beginning of the missionary educational movement in the public schools and continuing in the churches and colleges of the land. In what way the public school could particularly benefit the movement does not seem apparent.

Drury Lane's Oldest Clown.

James Ikoughty, for 30 years performing with a troupe of dogs on the West Pier at Brighton, England, claims to be Drury Lane's oldest clown. Ikoughty, who will be 90 years of age in August, appeared as clown in the Drury Lane pantomime of 1851.

Lim Jucklin on Horse Sense

By Opie Read

The wiseacres of the neighborhood were discussing the question of common sense, sitting about the blacksmith shop, waiting for their horses to be shod, when a silence that had suddenly fallen warned old Limuel Jucklin that it was time for him to say something.

"Yes," he remarked, "good, hard horse sense is of so rare a quality that it is nearly always taken for genius. All that most any man needs is a little jedgment, the very governor on the machinery of this life; and bein' so needful it is what we seem to be most lackin' in. To know how to do a thing isn't much more important than knowin' what not to do. Knowin' when to do it is real genius. If you cut your wheat before it's ripe you get sappy straw for your labor. If you wait too long you get but dry straw. Jedgment comes from experience, and common sense is the wisdom beat into the heads of men that have gone before."

"You leave out education," spoke up a schoolmaster.

"Oh, no, I don't, for education is the experience of the mind. It goes back beyond all books, and the first book must have been written out of experience. But to read of the common sense of the other men don't always give us common sense of our own. In my house is a book written by a man named Kant, he calls it the 'Critique of Pure Reason.' Well, since I have more or less let up on hard work I've given a good deal of attention to the books that fortune and a little lookin' around have thrown in my way, but this here one stumped me. I read it forward and I tried it backward, up and down, and it seemed like I wa'n't goin' to get a thing out of it. My wife, seein' how I was bothered, begged me to throw it away and eat a boiled dinner that she put on the table. I did eat, but all the time I was thinkin' about that thing all set out there in words plain enough, but what didn't appear to have any meanin'. After dinner I took it up again and fought with it, hollin' it this way and that, up and down, in the sun at the window and in the shade; but I'll be hanged if I could get at the juice of it. Finally, however, I struck one thing that paid me for all my trouble, and it was this, as near as I can remember it: 'A man may read all books and understand them, and he may be able to speak all languages, and yet all this cannot atone for a lack of what we know as mother wit.' Mother wit—horse sense—you understand."

"But how are we to get or rather I should say, after maturer consideration, how are we to proceed toward the acquirement of that quality denominated by the great German philosopher as mother wit?" protested the schoolmaster, and old Lim replied:

"I'll be blowed if I know."

"Then education is useless," said the schoolmaster.

"Oh, no, but sometimes it does seem like an experiment. There are two sorts of education, you know—one of memory only and one that teaches a feller how to think for himself. I knew a feller that could hear a sermon once and could come away and repeat every word of it, but he didn't have ability enough of his own to write a notice and tack it on a tree announcin' that he had a mule for sale. He was like a blanket that is rained on. You couldn't wring out of him any more moisture than fell on him. Yes, sir, common sense is mighty nigh everything. And when it rises into a sort of enthusiasm it is inspiration. Sometimes ignorance takes fire and in its light we see beautiful pictures. If the man is altogether unlettered we call him crazy. But if he can write he may prove to be a genius. It is a sudden lurch of common sense, an overhalanein', as it were."

"Then you call genius insanity," said the schoolmaster.

"No, not that, but it is a sort of passion that don't halt to reason by slow means, but that sees all reason in one flash. Now there was Shakespeare—"

"Written by Bacon; but proceed," broke in the schoolmaster.

"I don't care if it was written by ham, lard or soap grease, its sentences are staked off with stars, snatched out of the sky on a June night. It took the world several hundred years to catch up, and neither the railroad train nor these pantin' wagons that, bull-eyed, plunge across the country has outstripped that book yet. And what is it? A torch held high by common sense. A lantern ray flung into the black face of human nature. Up shows a grim countenance, and then we wonder how a man could have been so smart. Of course, the man that wrote that book had to have words, but common sense finds all the words that are needful to its purposes, all the words there is if there should be a demand for them, and then make a few."

The schoolmaster shook his head. "Those immortal plays were written by a man of the world, and a world man, of that day, could have come from no place other than a university."

"That's all right and it may be true, but the university is a premium put on common sense. It's a flower bloomin' on the top of the buildin'. And I believe that it would be better for every man and every woman to go through a university. It is the warehouse of the ages. It might not teach us how to make a better livin', but it would enable us better to enjoy the livin' we have. I don't believe in this fool idea that ignorance is any ways kin to bliss. I know what the sayin' is, where ignorance is bliss, and so on, but the world got it wrong and thought it was a plea for ignorance. And neither do I think that a little learnin' is as dangerous as much ignorance. If a man's got little the chances are that he'll get more. If we've got mother wit, and it has come out of nature, let us thank nature for it and try to improve it. But trace it on back and mebby you'll find that it comes from some care that our forefathers took of themselves. One of these days we'll be forefathers, and right here, I want to say, rests somethin' of a responsibility. Let us all try to light up the future with common sense."

Old man Brizintine said that he was willing. He was sure that he was indebted to his forefathers. His great grandfather had been noted as the best horse trader in the state, "and," he added, "if it hadn't been for him I might not have been such a good judge of a colt."

"Yes, might not have been here at all," Limuel spoke up. "But, not wishin' to do the old man an injustice, I may remark that horse sense don't particularly lend itself to horse swappin'."

Brizintine had begun to swell with a resentful reply when the schoolmaster spoke. "But giving genius the place of high common sense, undergoing, I might say, some of its own and peculiar evolutions, don't you believe that it sometimes goes through this world unappreciated?"

"Well, I have heard folks say that they wan't taken at their worth. I know some that haven't been taken at their word. Recollect old Gabner Hightower, over on the creek? He had a son that was a born genius. His name was Elihu and he looked it all right. They didn't want him to soil his hands for fear that it might smirch his genius. His mother wanted him for the church because he wan't strong in body, and his dad wanted him for the law, because his habit of silence would prove him a good jedge. In the meantime Jim, Elihu's brother, worked in the field. Well, they first tried the pulpit and then they tried the law, but Elihu had too much genius for either one. Then they thought he was designed by nature to write hymns, and he tried his hand at it, but failed. They tried many things before they found out what he had a genius for."

"And what was it?" the schoolmaster inquired.

"Well, nothin' but for just lookin' like a genius. And Jim, his brother, invented an evaporator for makin' sorghum molasses and now owns about a third of the county. Yes, sir, hoss sense."

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Couldn't Make It Out.

Barnard college girls are being instructed on the subject of equal suffrage by a course of lectures giving both sides of the question. The antis were represented by Mrs. Barclay Hazard and Mrs. Annie Nathan Meyer. The girls say they found no difficulty with Mrs. Meyer's speech, but that they couldn't make out what Mrs. Hazard meant when she said: "Let no restless ambition to play a part in factional public life induce you to surrender the absolutely unique position which we pioneers have gained for you." Mrs. Florence Kelly is the suffragist who is to show them the other side.

Easy to Watch Auto's Speed.

A New York inventor has devised a mechanical attachment for an automobile which, on pressing a button, will start a watch or clock fastened to the dashboard. At the end of a mile the watch stops automatically, thus enabling the driver to test his speed from time to time.

A Study in Finance.

Why is it that, when you finally have a good bank roll, you are so reluctant to buy all those things you felt you needed?